LOSERS - KEEPERS
Mark 8:31-36
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I was told by a very articulate psychologist at Purdue University never to apologize at the beginning of a sermon. I know the truth of that advice. I also know that confession is good for the soul. And so, without apologizing, I confess that much of what I have to say this morning grows out of a Commencement Address I delivered this week. My only real apology is that a very few of you may be hearing some material twice. On the other hand it was so hot and crowded in here on Thursday you may not have heard much the first time around.

When I was a youngster and one of my friends misplaced something, a book, a dime, a baseball - and which I happened to find - there was a poetic couplet which served well. I could say, and always did, "Finders - Keepers: Losers - Weepers". Nothing extraordinary there. Even though the finder wasn't ordinarily a keeper, unless the loser wasn't in the vicinity, the little couplet described a small piece of human reality in rather precise terms. You may keep what you find; and to lose something is a sad situation. Sometimes it makes you weep.

How curious - how radically backwards of Jesus, therefore to suggest, on one occasion, that in one very important respect, the reverse is the truth. Finders are the weepers: and the losers are the real keepers.

The text this morning constitutes what the scholars call the first passion announcement. Peter had just verbalized his deepest intuitions about the real identity of Jesus of Nazareth: ("You are the Christ".) Jesus seized the occasion to spell out what that meant: to be precise, he was going to suffer and die. Peter was horrified: there were heated words. And then Jesus -("If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it.")

Jesus said that, or something very similar to it several times. At other places in the narrative the words "for my sake and the Gospel's" are omitted so that it becomes a kind of proverb - save life and you will lose it: lose life and you will save it, or find it, or have it.

It is important to remember that at the time Mark wrote his account these words described a ghastly literal situation. People were ~~dying~~ losing their lives for their faith. And some, we must assume, were choosing to save their own lives by denying their faith. New Testament scholars feel that the ("take up his cross and follow") comes from the actual Roman custom under Nero, of forcing known Christians to parade through the

streets carrying the cross beam of the instrument upon which they would be nailed shortly for the Emperor's entertainment. They are, in that context, powerful, almost unspeakably poignant words.

They are not, I have always felt, applicable to the little inconveniences and annoyances which we sometimes describe as our cross to bear. That is almost blasphemous. They point to a Lord who died because he believed it was the way to live. They testify to thousands, millions of people who have chosen - some very dramatically, most quietly, simply, to die rather than save themselves by some compromise of faith or integrity. They point today, I would submit, to brothers and sisters who feel so deeply about issues of political, economic or social controversy that they are willing to risk a great deal for their integrity. They point to John Paul II, who is finally putting some of that monolithic, encrusted, incredibly wealthy tradition on the line for the sake of Jesus Christ, and on behalf of oppressed people everywhere. He just may get his church in a lot of trouble - the kind of trouble that will give it new life and power and authenticity.

We're not talking about toothaches, or a particularly difficult assignment in math, or an annoying aunt who comes to dinner too frequently. We're talking about a way of living life which, frankly, sees the greatest good, and

therefore the greatest happiness in terms of letting go, giving, serving, risking, rather than saying, clutching, protecting, preserving.

That remains a radical suggestion: it is a position almost diametrically opposite to the cultic theology of traditional middle class values. You will not find in the pages of Esquire, New Yorker, Fortune, Time, Playboy, or the Columbus Monthly the idea that real life will result when you learn to sacrifice. Quite the reverse is the content of our dearest fantasy: the chief end of men and women in this culture is to buy, own and accumulate, and to reflect on the ecstacy of it all while meditating in a hot tub.

The purpose of education within this cultural theology is to provide a marketable skill which results in a good job and good salary with which to buy things. When I meet with young couples prior to their wedding one of the things we talk about is the future. I ask them how they want it to be in five years or ten years. With few exceptions their initial response is to tell me* ~~what they hope to own~~. They simply reflect a culture that has been defining real life for them, since the day they were born, as owning things.

Historian Daniel Boorstin believes we have been

totally misled by the philosophy of rising expectation. He writes: "We expect too much of the world. We expect our house not only to shelter us, to keep us warm in the winter, and cool in the summer, but to relax us, to dignify us, to encompass us with soft music and interesting hobbies, to be a playground, theater and bar. We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible - far more than the world can deliver."

The philosophy of rising expectations and the simple reality of built-in-obsolescence means that there is, and always will be, something more to own. Our sense of fullness, of real life, of happiness therefore is destined to last about as long as the paper ~~the~~ finish on a new automobile, which in Columbus, Ohio, is about eighteen months.

Jesus' suggestion is radically different from the cult of accumulation. It is also fundamentally different from the basic self-centeredness which characterizes the latest moral imperative of pop culture. That position ~~that~~ is you will find your life when you discover yourself, and you will discover yourself when you do two things - look long and lovingly at yourself, get in touch with yourself; and then give yourself permission to do whatever yourself wishes to do. It is called the "New Narcissism". It is

Narcissus - ~~fell~~ entered wd his own reflection & ~~fell~~ in the pond.

why we are called the "~~New~~ Me Generation". Young people seem to believe it religiously; middle age people have followed suit.

Time Magazine in its weekly essay called it "The Weakness that Starts at Home"(June 4), and quoted Alexis de Tocquerville who fell in love with America early in our life and saw us sometimes, more clearly than we have ever been able to see ourselves. He wrote in 1835, "No power on earth can prevent the increasing equality of conditions from leading every member of the community to be wrapped up in himself...And no one can ~~fo~~r foretell into what disgrace and wretchedness they would plunge themselves lest they should have to sacrifice something of their own well-being to the prosperity of their fellow creatures." The Californian who leapt out of his car and beat up the pregnant woman who cut in front of him at a service station two weeks ago gave us an uncomfortable look at what selfishness and self-assertiveness can become.

Life is not gained in exercising one's selfhood so aggressively that self becomes God any more that it is gained by purchasing every new product or gadget to come down the road.

Jesus suggested that if you want to gain life you must learn to give it away. If you want to enjoy something

even your own being - you must learn to loosen your grip a bit.

We know the truth of that psychologically. Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, who survived Auschwitz and knows a bit about life, therefore, writes, "The more one forgets oneself - giving oneself to a cause or another person - the more human he is...~~happiness is the side effect of living and the self-transcendence of existence~~. Once one has served a cause or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself... pleasure and happiness are by-products...~~Happiness must ensue. It cannot be pursued~~." (The Unconscious God,p.79,84,85).

Parents learn that along the way. The greatest joy is to love unselfishly, without thought for personal gain. Some of us are fortunate to have been taught that the profoundest pleasure of all is to give someone else pleasure. Albert Schweitzer wrote one time, "The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." (p.85).

Jesus said, "If you lose your life, you will find it." If you find something important enough to live for, some cause, some project, some person - to which, or to whom - you can give yourself - you will be truly and fully alive.

But if you live for yourself - your own amusement, entertainment - if ~~eagth~~ in your life is structured around you — you're already dead a little

That's the secret of Christian faith. It is what Jesus wanted to teach his friends. And it is what, in his service, following him in obedient discipleship, they learned. It is the call of Jesus Christ to you and me - today - to find our lives by losing them for his sake.

It is risky business, to be sure. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote somewhere about a man so obsessed with protecting his own health that he made his raincoat and rubbers his main concern, and thus missed the whole pageant of nature.

To care deeply about someone or something is to risk getting hurt. To sit in a meeting and speak to a concern about which you have some deep convictions is to risk sounding foolish. To hug a friend or weep for joy or clap in church or sing the national anthem when everyone else is standing in ~~strong~~ Stoney silence is to risk appearing foolish. To run a race is to risk - not just ~~running~~ winning, but finishing dead last. To love totally - is not simply to take a chance on ecstacy. It is to risk rejection.

Life is so very precious. It appears that we should be prudent: that we should protect what we have and take no unnecessary chances. And the moment we begin to think like that, we begin to lose the very preciousness we want.

In Jesus' idiom, we lose life-which means dying. C.S.Lewis said it beautifully: "Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell."

Jesus Christ calls us to life - life fully and joyfully lived. Millions of men and women before us have discovered themselves in his service. Some of them have died. More of them have lived fully - because they learned, from him, to give, to sacrifice, to serve.

May we learn from him too - "losers are the real keepers!"

"Whoever will save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

Amen.

God our Father, give us the courage to let go: to risk everything for you. And teach us again, the joy of emptying ourselves in the service of others. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.